World Chronicle

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1999 - INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF OLDER PERSONS

In fifty years time, one out of five people on earth will be 60 and older. The graying of the population will have a great impact on our societies. The United Nations has designated 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons which aims to raise awareness of the fast-changing demographic picture of older persons worldwide, to stimulate action, strategies and encourage research and information exchange. Alexandre Sidorenko, head of the UN Programme on Ageing, will discuss this and other issues on ageing in this episode of **World Chronicle.**

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

On the eve of a new millennium, we are about to bear witness to a global society that is the oldest in the history of the world. The elderly population –aged 60 or over – is growing faster than all other age groups. This group will increase from 200 million in 1950 to 1.2 billion in 2025, a six-fold increase over 75 years! The United Nations has designated the year of 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons to highlight conditions and expectations of people sixty years of age and older.

Our guest today heads the United Nations Programme on Ageing. He is Alexandre Sidorenko, who is also Coordinator for the International Year of Older Persons.

Joining me to talk with Dr. Sidorenko is Kristian Knutsen of *Yomiuri Shimbun* and Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency, DPA*.

Dr. Sidorenko, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

SIDORENKO: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Sidorenko, it seems that here in the United States, the people who are involved in advertising still are targeting the age group 18 to 49 which they consider to be their best desirable audience yet we have just spoken about the increasing numbers of people over 60. Why do you think this is, i mean, is there a sort of prejudice against the older people and do you think that this is something which should be addressed in the International Year?

SIDORENKO: I think it's a combination of factors, as a matter of fact. First of all, those people who are doing the advertisement know pretty well that most of the customs are being formed in the early stages of life and this is very pertinent to what we are going to achieve through the International Year of Older Persons. We have to keep in mind that if you are to live the longer and prosperous life and the life of fulfilment, you have to start pretty early to form our habits and healthy lifestyles, the economic security for later stages of our life, and sometimes when you are addressing these issues at the later

stages it might be a little bit too late. On the other side, yes, I guess you are absolutely right. The advertisement companies have not paid enough attention to the needs of persons of older generations. They do have their own needs which have to be addressed specifically.

LITTLEJOHNS: Here in the United States, particularly, there seems to be something of an obsession with youth. Is this common in other industrialized societies from your experience as a gerontologist?

SIDORENKO: Yes. It's quite a common approach and one of the reasons is that this habit has been created in industrial societies as they moved from a gray end to urban capitalism in the middle of 18th century and later on when the older persons have been recognized as an obstacle to industrial development in those countries and when the whole idea of retirement was developed in the later stages, particularly in the 19th century.

LITTLEJOHNS: Here in the United Nations, people still are obliged to retire at the relatively early age, from what we just said, of 60. Is this something that also should be attended to?

SIDORENKO: Well, as a member of the United Nations Secretariat I feel reluctant to talk about internal policy but I believe, ye , people should be ....

LITTLEJOHNS: But it's not so much internal policy, it's the policy of governments imposed on the UN.

SIDORENKO: Yes, oh absolutely, yes, you're absolutely rights. I guess the people should be treated and considered on the basis of their performance and their contribution rather than on their biological or chronological age.

KNUTSEN:: Mr. Sidorenko, when the general public does seem to focus on the rising numbers of the elderly, unfortunately, the images that come to mind tend to be negative. If you think about bankrupt pension systems or an overboard health care system, what can be done to sort of counter all these images but yet still be honest about facing the real problems that are going to be created by this process.

SIDORENKO: First of all, we have to recognize the most important fact that the aging has been an achievement of human civilization and this achievement has

become particularly visible at the end of this century. So if we adopt this approach to aging as an achievement of our society and inevitably then they approached older persons as custodians of this achievement, we have to reconsider all our policies and there is definitely the way and the space of adopting new policies towards social welfare, towards employment like for instance the flexible retirement age for older persons so they would be able to continue to contribute to the society and to the prosperity of their own families.

NGUYEN: You know, pursuing the idea of Mike about some industrialized countries promoting youthful image, you know, in the western countries, I wonder if that has an effect also on the respect of the older people in those societies also. When the population respect so much the young people and the beauty, and youth and so on, they have less respect for the older people, don't you think so in some western countries?

SIDORENKO: I guess you're absolutely right in describing these pictures. It's been a prevailing image of old age in developed countries and there's some lessons which can be learned by the developed nations of post-industrial society from traditional or pre-industrial societies where older persons are considered to be the custodians of old traditions and the most respectful members of those societies and it is interesting – it would be interesting – for instance to look into, maybe call it social technologies of pre-industrial societies which favoured older persons as the achievement of the tribe of the society in general.

NGUYEN: But is there any effort by the UN also to reverse the trend and really, you know, ask the youth and young people to make an effort to look at the older person as human beings instead of something you can discard after retirement.

SIDORENKO: You will be surprised to learn that even in the most industrialized countries there is quite a good and a quite strong bonds between old and younger generations. I based my statement on the recent opinion poll in Western European countries. Generations are quite united and the younger generations are willing to contribute to the welfare of the older members of the society. But there's also a consideration of a possible inter-generational conflict between younger and older generations. You mentioned the reason of this conflict to avoid it, the most important

thing to be done is to change the image of old age as the time of only decline and to change the image of older persons to change the image of old age and to improve this image to sound as a time of fulfilment and continuing the individual development.

KNUTSEN:: How has the socio-economic development of women impacted the living conditions of the elderly? It seems to me that there's a sort of concurrent developments that – and I am wondering how do we avoid having to choose between the development of women economically and otherwise and improving the living conditions of the elderly?

SIDORENKO: There are several issues which are relevant to your question. First of all, old age is increasingly a women's issue. It's some sort of effeminazation of aging because the majority of older persons in old age are women.

LITTLEJOHNS: Women, I believe, tend to live what – about eight years longer than men.

SIDORENKO: They tend to live longer than men. It depends on the society – with a few exceptions of few countries in Southeast Asia, women live longer. But the paradox is actually they live longer in many years of disability, suffering from many diseases. Nobody knows the reason for that. That's a big question for bio-medical and gerontological studies in the future. Another thing that the women, not only their health status but also their economic status is in jeopardy, is they usually continue their old age living as widows, though the economic situation has also to be addressed. The last issue, which is very important, women have traditionally been the major care providers within the family for both children and older persons. With women increasingly, particularly in developed but also increasingly in developing countries going into labour markets. Policies have to be developed that would take care of those issues of long-term care for older persons and care of younger members of the family.

NGUYEN: Can we say that longevity is a question of genes these days or is it chance.

SIDORENKO: I don't think that there's an obvious answer to this question. According to one of the most recent studies, they may apply to more than 60 percent to

genes but the rest to the environment.

NGUYEN: To the environment and health service.

SIDORENKO: Absolutely, including health service.

NGUYEN: Is there a country or countries that really the population is growing old faster than others?

SIDORENKO: The fastest growth are in developing countries and we have a very famous example, something which took France more than 150 years to increase their population of older persons from 7 to 14 percent, is going to occur in Tunisia in 15 years – almost 10 times faster without infrastructure in place to take care of this increasing numbers of older persons.

NGUYEN: But currently, Germany and Japan have the fastest growing population.

SIDORENKO: They have the largest proportion of older persons. This is the difference in aging challenges in developed and developing countries. In developing countries, we have the fastest rate of growth of older persons while in developed countries, they have the greatest proportion. In many western European countries, for instance, in Japan it is currently more 20 percent of their population older than 60 years and it is going to grow so in a couple of decades it will be more than – close to – 30 percent so each third In the population will be at the age of 60 plus.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Sidorenko, everyone was greatly impressed when Senator John Glen went into outer space at the ripe old age of 77. Do you think it might be a good idea to enlist his services in your programme? Perhaps as a goodwill ambassador of whom there are several in the UN in various capacities, perhaps Goodwill Ambassador of the Ageing?

SIDORENKO: I will be delighted to hear that Senator Glen agreed to do so. But we certainly count on him already as he has been doing wonderful job of promoting the issue of productive, healthy and fulfilling ageing already.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mentioned a while ago about the situation in developing countries. It could be argued, I suppose, that the International Year is, in a way, a cruel

joke for some of the developing countries where the life expectancy is still not more than the 40's. What do you think about that?

SIDORENKO: Definitely ageing has not become a priority issue for developing countries for obvious reasons – they have so many big and small problems on their shoulders. But the International Year of Older Persons would serve its purpose as the starting point for developing countries to get prepared for, what is called very often in the media, age-grade the growing number of older persons coming in those societies without the infrastructure prepared to meet that challenge. So the promotional – the effect of the International Year of Older Persons should not be under-emphasized from this point of view.

KNUTSEN:: I think it's the case with people of all age groups in many parts of the globe, there is a trend towards increased urbanization, I think your campaign cites that over half of senior citizens would be living in cities. What does that mean to be old in the next century being in the cities. How does that impact the experience for the elderly?

SIDORENKO: Urbanization is right and noted to perhaps the second most prominent in demographic development in the current society and the majority of the older persons are going to live in the cities in most developed and developing world. In the developing country, most of them are still in the rural area. What it means? It often means, particularly in developing countries, that families are dismantled as younger members of the family are moving to the cities and older persons are left behind. Very often when older persons are brought to the cities, they find themselves in a completely new and not very friendly environment and definitely that's another policy change for member states to address it but it is also a challenge for instance for Non-Governmental Organizations to look into this issue.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle.** Our guest is Alexandre Sidorenko who heads the United Nations Programme on Ageing. Dr. Sidorenko, given ideal circumstances, how long may human beings expect to live? I mean, could it be well past the hundred – the hundred something? We have Robert Butler, the famous American Gerontologist – you are a famous gerontologist, too – but he is an American Gerontologist

on this programme and he spoke of the possibility of people living well past a hundred and I believe in some conduct? Kristian Knutsen mentioned several thousand in Japan who are over a hundred. What age, would you say, is the limit at the moment?

SIDORENKO: Oh, he can speak about, shall we say, biological limits of lifespan and it has been more or less established based on the many centuries of observation. I would put it to at around 125 years, but with the advancement of modern technologies and bio-medical, bio-technological and genetic research we may expect that this biological barrier can be broken.

LITTLEJOHNS: But when you say 125 years, does that mean that perhaps the final decade of the person's life would be one beset with all kinds of illnesses, ailments of old age – arthritis, you name it – all in reasonably good health?

SIDORENKO: It is quite possible. The challenge – and that was emphasized in the recent meeting organized by the World Health Organization in Kobe, Japan was specific on this issue how can we actually compress the age-associated illnesses to move them towards the end of one's life so that the people would be able to enjoy the healthier years of their later life and it's an attainable goal.

NGUYEN: Talking about diets, do you think older people should become vegetarians also?

SIDORENKO: I would say, it should be started much earlier and it is quite reflected in the year's theme: Towards a society for all ages – was one of the major dimensions, a lifelong individual development. You have to promote a healthy lifestyle through the whole lifespan. It should be started earlier when it is not too late to embark on a healthy lifestyles to live a long and fulfilling life.

NGUYEN: Is there really a menu for this kind of things? Do you encourage people to eat less meat and more of vegetable and fruits and so on.

LITTLEJOHNS: Lots of vitamins, selenium ....

SIDORENKO: I guess it is quite widely agreed and recognized that healthy diet should include lots of vegetables, preferably raw vegetables. There are two very famous diets in the world which have been recommended by gerontologists. One is the

Japanese diet which includes a lot of fish and raw fish and the other one is the Mediterranean diet which has a lot of once again, vegetables, olive oil and a little bit of red wine, as well.

KNUTSEN: Living longer, the quality of life is an issue – you want to push those diseases towards the end – compress them. And some of the things, I guess, that could improve the quality of life is continuing education – you mentioned that – or the idea of remaining employed longer. How do we approach governments with those ideas considering the fact that there is scant resources providing for employment and health care for the young?

SIDORENKO: I guess the challenge is through a completely reconsidered paradigm of life long individual development where we used to have certain compartments, youth devote it mostly to education, adult life to family raising and career development and old age to leisure. One of the approaches which we are trying to explore now in presenting the form of policy framework is to distribute those different approaches equally through the lifespan so that education could be equally represented at different stages of life as well as leisure and employment. That's one of the possible approaches. The United Nations Programme on Ageing embarked on an important task of developing a new strategy on ageing for the next century. We are going to explore those different approaches. We don't have an answer. We don't have a prescription. There's no blueprint of a society for old ages which is the theme of the Year. But the Year offers an opportunity to explore those different approaches and to come up with some possible solutions, but it's definitely upon Member States to decide on which approach they would like to adopt.

NGUYEN: Dr. Sidorenko, the AIDS epidemic, does it affect the population of older persons also?

SIDORENKO: Not very severely in African countries. There's a real gap of middle generation people that's dying from AIDS and you can often find in different villages the people of older generations, of older people taking care of the youngest generation of children.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Sidorenko, we said in the introduction that the International Year of Older Persons is to highlight conditions and expectations of people sixty years of age and over. How are you going to do that? What is the Programme going to do to highlight these conditions and expectations? What do you expect governments to do? What is the UN doing to coordinate with governments?

SIDORENKO: First of all, I would like to emphasize that given the Year's theme "toward the society for all ages", the Year observance concerns everybody as well as policy development in the field of ageing should be focussed on people of all generations. If you really want to achieve a new society, a society for all ages, the policy should be in place to address the needs of people of different generations providing them with the purpose of longer and fruitful life. That's the challenge. It's a new approach which we have been trying to emphasize within the United Nations Programme on Ageing, looking not into a particular age group, however important it is, this group might be, but looking into a whole lifespan, into whole individual development from cradle to death, so to say, and to make these periods as healthy, as fruitful as possible.

LITTLEJOHNS: Would you say that there is an element of conflict among generations as things stand now – the younger people are a little bored with old people, they just as soon kick them off and not have to worry about them because of this continuing argument in the United States about social security, the high cost of social security, and so on? Are these things that can be addressed in the International Year?

SIDORENKO: It certainly should be and the whole idea of the Year's theme "Toward the Society for all Ages" looks specifically in this possible problem but I have to be honest with you – this consideration is based mostly on anecdotal evidence. We don't have, so to say, hard proof that the younger generations are inevitably going to be in conflict with the older generations and it certainly can be avoided as soon as we would be able to come up with the purpose, the meaning of old life – that the older persons could be viewed as active parts of the societies – the contributors, rather than simply consumers.

KNUTSEN: One of the striking things about that social security you are referring to is the presence of the American Association of Retired Persons, the AARP. It's a huge

group and has a tremendous role ...

LITTLEJOHNS: Which you can join at the age of fifty.

KNUTSEN: Fifty, that's right. You don't have to wait till you're elderly. How widespread is this kind of organization of elderly citizens? Is this just here or do you find it elsewhere? And is there any worry that this could degenerate into sort of an inter-generational squabble over resources?

LITTLEJOHNS: Because these guys want more of the pie, is that what you mean?

KNUTSEN: Yes, just that and if they're organized to try to ....

SIDORENKO: AARP is unique in many senses. First of all, this is the largest organization of older persons – they have more than 34 million members.

LITTLEJOHNS: Their monthly magazine which I have seen has a circulation of more than 20 million.

KNUTSEN: Half of the U.S. senators are also members.

SIDORENKO: That's right. That's definitely the largest and the most powerful organization of older persons which you may find in the world. But quite recently, we learned about establishing of a political party of older persons and you will be surprised to learn that it was done in Russia quite recently with quite prominent leaders joining the party in recent months. The main influence is that there is part of political development even in that country, but in other countries, yes, you will also be able to find some very powerful and influential Non-Governmental Organizations, some of them are doing mostly charity work, some of them are embarked on developmental issues, trying to develop projects in which older persons can be active and caring and taking care of their family members and the other members of the society. It's not that obvious that as older persons are united, they're united for the benefit of a particular age group. They may be united for the benefit of the whole society and it should be recognized as that.

NGUYEN: Do you suggest that retirement communities which are really developing in the U.S. to spread out to other countries also?

SIDORENKO: Well, it's a matter of economic influence of the particular

country. What is affordable in the United States not necessarily could be affordable in other countries. Besides there's also national traditions which would ride people in their particular habits in older years. It's a nice thing, if you can afford it, of course.

NGUYEN: It's very expensive actually.

SIDORENKO: And it is expensive at the same time. It's definitely not a model for developing countries.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are you reaching out to Non-Governmental Organizations like the AARP and similar organizations in other countries to ....

SIDORENKO: Absolutely.

LITTLEJOHNS: And what can they do apart, I mean, they presumably don't have to preach to their own people -- I mean their own members, because they are already in that age group that we have been talking about. What can they do otherwise?

SIDORENKO: Oh, we have been talking AARP already. This organization has established a wonderful initiative for the year. It's called coalition 99. It's a very unusual arrangement as they brought together representatives of Non-Governmental Organizations, governments, prominent individuals in different parts of the world. More than 80 countries, if I remember correctly.

LITTLEJOHNS: More than how many?

SIDORENKO: More than 80 countries all over the world working for the cause of promoting the seam of the international year of older persons and bringing together the experience which older persons in those countries gained. We have been in touch ... we have been working together actually with Europeans, some other international and national and Non-Government Organizations to promote the Year's theme.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Sidorenko, we have less than half a minute left. We have inevitably come to the question of costs. How much money is going to be spent on this by the UN?

SIDORENKO: Well, we have a zero budget for the International Year of Older Persons. That's the very short answer. The only additional funds that we got for the year was one staff member who is dealing specifically with the issues of promotion of

policies on behalf of older persons. That's it.

LITTLEJOHNS: That's sadly a model of economy. Dr. Sidorenko, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle.** Our guest has been Dr. Alexandre Sidorenko who heads the United Nations Programme on Ageing. He was interviewed by Kristian Knutsen of *Yomiuri Shimbun* and Tuyet Nguyen of the *German Press Agency, DPA*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**